

Lent 2B. March 1, 2015. Mark 8: 31-38

I reached my peak level of coolness when I was sixteen years old. I can name the exact moment that this happened. I came home from school, wearing my blue jeans, white t-shirt, and red leather jacket (I was kind of in a James Dean phase). I walked in the door and rolled my shoulders back, sending the jacket cascading effortlessly down my arms. Then in one smooth motion I swiped the jacket to my right hand and tossed it carelessly, without looking, off to the side. And the jacket glided beautifully through the air to nestle, hung perfectly, on the round top of the bannister to our stairs. It was an accident, and proof that I was at the highest level of coolness that I have ever been able to attain. Twenty minutes later, my intelligent, gorgeous, popular girlfriend looked deep into my eyes and said, “I think we should just be friends.”

This traumatic series of events has given me great theological insight into what happens to Peter in this week’s gospel reading. You see, in the verses immediately before the passage we just read, Peter hits his peak level of coolness. Jesus sits the disciples down and asks them who people are saying that he is. Then after they’ve thrown out a few options, Jesus asks who the disciples say that he is, and Peter has his leather jacket moment. He says, simply, “You are the Messiah.” He’s the first of the followers to get this right, the first to dare to articulate what they may have all been hoping—that this man from nowhere, followed by his ragtag group of well-intentioned but often mistaken disciples, just might be the one they’ve all been waiting for.

Peter’s simple statement is a triumph of vision, hope, and audacity. And three verses later, that same Messiah, Jesus, is calling Peter Satan and ordering him to get back into line. What happened? I’m afraid that the analogy with my sixteen-year-old self breaks down here, so we’ll have to rely on a little more speculation. The fancy way of expressing my theory is to say that Peter illustrates in this story the vast ditch between hope and expectation.

Hope is a theological word, that finally means trust in God’s promises, regardless of how unpromising circumstances seem to be. Expectation is an economics word, that refers to what is most likely, after we’ve done our calculations and weighed the probabilities and need to make a plan. Expectations are good and necessary; we build our lives on them. But hope is what inspires us to keep building, when it’d be easier just to give up. Hope is the light in the darkness, the insistence that the next step is worth taking, even though we can’t see fully where we’re going.

From today’s stories, Abraham is the more obvious paragon of hope. Paul identifies this in the letter to the Romans: hoping against hope, Abraham believed. The story is both poignant and complicated. This is not the first time that God has promised that Abraham and Sarah will have a son. In fact, by my count, this is the fourth time that God has made this promise. God keeps coming to Abraham and making promises about his descendants, but then, the monthly proof that no baby is on the way comes, and Abraham and Sarah go on about their very colorful lives, getting into trouble and making mistakes and helping other people and bailing out their hapless relative named Lot. And then the monthly proof stops, and with it the consistent on schedule disappointment, but also the possibility that next month might be different.

And then, when there was no more hope, when it was obvious to everyone that Sarah would never have a child, God comes again. What makes Abraham special isn’t his

super-righteous lifestyle—he makes plenty of mistakes, and some of them are horrible—but his insatiable hope. His ability to hope against hope, to live into hope, even at great cost to himself.

Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah is a statement from hope—it takes hope to see a Galilean as the Messiah, to see this guy whom they've seen sleep, eat, do other bodily things, be sad, be angry, get dirty, as the one who is bringing salvation. It's a beautiful and surprising thing to say. But there's a problem: Peter has certain expectations about what being the Messiah means. And these expectations certainly do not involve great suffering, rejection, and death. We can't know for sure, but Peter probably expected that being the Messiah meant driving the Romans out of Israel and becoming a king, establishing a rule of justice free from foreign oppression.

Whatever positive action Peter expected from the Messiah, we know that he didn't expect the difficult path that Jesus was describing, because he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, thus earning a new nickname, Satan. Finally, his hope isn't strong enough to stand up to his expectations. Yes, he can hope that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, but he cannot trust that the path of salvation can go through suffering, rejection, and death. His hope isn't strong enough to lead him through the darkest places of human life. He doesn't think it will be easy, but the suffering and death that Jesus is describing is a place where Peter sees no hope. You wonder whether Peter heard that last item in Jesus' to-do list: and after three days rise again.

So Jesus tries to clarify things. He calls everyone together and says these hard sayings about taking up a cross and losing our life to save it. It doesn't fit my brilliant sermon outline perfectly, but I think we have to deal with this. Yes, some people are called to martyrdom. Unfortunately, we are still seeing this happen. But Jesus is unequivocal: If any want to become my followers . . . let them deny themselves and gain their life only by losing it.

I think that for those of us who are not called to martyrdom, this passage isn't calling us to try to die, but to undertake the also very difficult task of letting go of the false selves that we have constructed, to let God call forth the truest self that we can be. What do we use to cocoon our true selves from the world? Security, possessions, success, power, cleverness, popularity, an insistence that our kids are—or at least will be—an impossible best? We build these false lives, based on anything other than love, because we set our minds on human things, rather than divine things. And because, frankly, it's terrifying to let anyone see our unvarnished selves, who we really are.

But that real self is who God created, who God loves, and who God longs to be loved by. In the end, we can only gain our true life by losing our false lives. And here, again, hope comes back into play. Because we *expect* that things will fall apart if we let go of the masks we have so carefully constructed. Whereas God calls us to be led by hope, to trust that we can rely on God's promises of love and life, whatever happens. Let's be honest: living by hope is much more dangerous than living according to expectations and chasing security and success. But when we do undergo great suffering, rejection, and even death, what we need is not expectations, but hope. A hope that knows that salvation is coming, that love is assured, even to the end. A hope that believes that even if we give our lives away, it is precisely our true life that we will save.